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A Message from the Navy Surgeon General: Tobacco Kills

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By Vice Adm. Matthew L. Nathan, Navy surgeon general and chief, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery



In the fight against tobacco, quitters
always win.

Recent events across the globe demonstrate that we are living in dramatic and challenging times. Around the world, Navy Medicine is ensuring the health and readiness of every Sailor, Marine and their family, and in doing so, helping to ensure we have a ready, capable force.

In today's fluid environment, our warfighters must remain vigilant and aware of dynamic threats, including those within the ranks. There is a silent killer amongst our men and women, and we must prevail in the fight against this enemy in order to maintain our unrivaled advantage as a global maritime force.

That enemy is tobacco, and its effects are deadly.

According to the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), tobacco use is the single greatest cause of preventable death globally. Because of this startling revelation, I often ponder how can we maintain a healthy, fighting force when Sailors and Marines still choose to use tobacco every day?

The numbers of illness and death caused by tobacco use are overwhelming.

Tobacco use causes nearly six million deaths per year worldwide (1). Current trends illustrate that tobacco use will cause more than eight million deaths annually by 2030 (2). Cigarette smoking by itself is responsible for almost 500,000 deaths per year in the U.S. (3). Smoking not only harm's your health, but it hurts the health of those around you. Secondhand tobacco smoke contributes to about 34,000 premature heart disease deaths and 7,300 lung cancer deaths. Studies show that the risk of developing heart disease is about 25-30 percent higher among people exposed to environmental tobacco smoke at home or work (4). On average, smokers die 10 years earlier than nonsmokers (5).

Although smoking is the most common form of tobacco use, all forms are harmful and addictive.

There is no safe tobacco product.

Despite the available evidence that tobacco kills, Sailors and Marines continue to use this habit-forming product. In our warfighting culture there is also an illusion that smoking relieves stress, which isn't true.

I understand it isn't easy to quit. Quitting for many is too much of a challenge and can't be done alone. However, studies indicate that an overwhelming amount of damage to your health can be reversed by quitting and the rewards of quitting are remarkable. Within 20 minutes of quitting, heart rate and blood pressure drop (7). Within 12 hours, carbon monoxide in the blood drops to normal. After one year, the excess risk of coronary heart disease is half that of a smoker (8).

Quitting tobacco will improve your overall health, finances, self-esteem and well-being. Within a few years of quitting, you will lower your risk of cancer, heart disease, and other chronic diseases. People who quit tobacco, regardless of their age, are less likely to die from tobacco-related illness than those who continue to use tobacco. All it takes is the desire, commitment and resources. Navy Medicine offers the help and resources— it's up to you to make the commitment. The choice is yours. It's never too late.

In the fight against tobacco, quitters always win.

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